



pact's

point of view

serving adopted children of color

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Ask Pact

Is Our 12-Year-Old Too Young To Find Her Birth Mother?

Q:

I am concerned that my daughter, who 12 years old, is so interested in finding and communicating with her birth mother. She asks me questions, wants me to write letters to the adoption agency and find out whatever information I can. When we adopted, we considered open adoptions, but ultimately decided that while we weren't opposed to knowing the family, our personalities were more fit for a private adoption. We just did not want to take on the possible issues of adding another family to our lives. Now, my daughter is writing letters she wants to send to her birthmother and I'm trying to think ahead to the possible repercussions of this interaction. What can I do to make sure this is the right time in her life for contact with her birth family?

A:

There are a few things that you need to do to begin to approach the development of your daughter's relationship with her birth mother. The reality is that when you and your partner made your decisions about openness your daughter wasn't old enough to be part of the discussion. Now she is exerting her own point of view and despite your trepidations, she is obviously going to eventually make contact, so you probably want to be part of that with her rather than leaving that for her to do without your guidance and support. You need to acknowledge your discomfort with the situation and to share your fears with your husband or partner and come up with a plan together how you will structure the interaction (if any) and create age appropriate boundaries for both your daughter and the birth mother. While it is perfectly natural to feel these fears and hesitations, these are YOUR issues and you should be careful not to transfer this energy to your daughter. Many adoptees hide their true feelings about search and reunion from their adoptive families for fear of hurting their feelings, as if it is their job to protect them.

Sit with your daughter and have a conversation about what her expectations are in making contact with her birth mother, being sure that you hold your discomfort in check while discussing these issues with your daughter. Does she want contact with her birth siblings and extended family? Adoptee interest in birth mothers and birth families may be anywhere from a simple curiosity to a full-scale obsession. Find out how important actual

contact at this moment is, does she just want some details that will satisfy some questions she has about the circumstances of her birth?

Does she just want some photos that will show a physical resemblance of what she looks like? Does she want to meet her birth mother? Consider also - what are the methods of contact that you are comfortable with? Letter writing only? Letter writing and phone calls? You will want to help her think about this as a process, not a one time event that is all or nothing. Help her envision beginning slowly and working toward getting information, rather than seeing it as a single step. Perhaps you will work to get more information from her file as a first step. Perhaps a visit to the hospital or town she was born in or connection with former foster parents if she had any, etc., as steps that give her a chance to try things out without risking everything in a meeting with her birth mother.

Consider offering your help to write the letters, or helping her decide what pictures she may want to include in the letter. Working with a therapist to help prepare and explore expectations as well as fears would probably be useful for both of you, both together and separately and offer a buffer in the event that things progress differently than expected so that you each have some outside support to help normalize and process feelings throughout.

Overall, simply making yourself available to your daughter so she knows that you are open to talk about her emotions will be a huge help in guiding her through her search.

You will also want to help prepare her for a range of possible outcomes if you do find her birth mother. What if the birth mother wants to meet your daughter in person? Is your daughter ready? How can you know? There is no way to make a generalization about younger adoptee ability to emotionally handle meeting their birth families. It simply depends.

The support she will receive from you and her adoptive family is paramount. It is also a good idea (as mentioned above) to think about concrete ways you will structure supervised interaction and age-appropriate activities. Do you want to invite her birth mother over for an afternoon lunch and games night with your family? Do you want to meet in a public place?

Consider reading books about reunion together, there are wide ranges of experiences of others who have done this and their stories will help prepare both of you for what might happen in this process. Discuss with your daughter the very real possibility that her birth mother may not want contact at all. Sometimes birth mothers choose private adoptions because they have circumstances around their pregnancy that could be painful and hard for them to acknowledge. Be sure to discuss the search and reunion process as a true process – that takes time, emotional energy and sometimes takes years, just like the development of any relationship.

Much like the ways open adoptions function, you will have to bear in mind cultural differences, family habits and your family ideals and values and make decisions about your daughter's relationship with her birth mother and birth family based on these considerations. Remember your daughter loves you and you love her, and your stability and support is most important in this life-long process of her finding out how adoption plays a part in a healthy self-identity. is one of your family values.